

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Global education has become a requirement, not a luxury. Technology integration into a curriculum has become a must. The Internet has become the transmission medium. Connectivity has become the goal. The proliferation of personal computers has permitted
5 virtually every classroom to have the capability to be “wired” and on-line. There is the realization that Internet connectivity can enhance the economic advancement of students and communities and provide a level of information on a broad scale hitherto unknown. It can permit the current generation to leap frog into this century. The failure to provide such connectivity can further exacerbate the split between the haves and the have-nots.

10 Along with global information access has come the realization that a level of monitoring and control must be exercised in order to keep the information highway from becoming an open sewer. Regular e-mail and open access chat rooms are generally not secure. Although there are some screening tools and blockages that can be employed, as a general matter, the flow of information cannot be adequately controlled in an open
15 environment.

Through community based filtered and monitored systems, such as is described in a Provisional Patent Application No: _____, teachers can set up accounts for themselves and for their classes in order to provide “shared learning” through collaboration. However, this limits the collaborative environment to those who are
20 willing to use the Internet and become part of a community. Moreover, to the extent that there is any financial burden or cost involved with the account, teachers may be reluctant to bear that obligation personally, inasmuch as it is being used for their professional activities. Similarly, establishing such an account may or may not be consistent with the

curriculum plans for a particular school or for the particular school system. Classrooms in wealthier areas may all be interconnected, while those in less affluent parts of a community may not, thus relying on those teachers to bear any economic cost of setting up and maintaining the account, along with the computer necessary to access it.

- 5 Provisional Patent Application No:_____ describes a method and system for multi-level monitoring and filtering of data transmissions (Schoolmail) that permits the creation within a school district or school system of a secure “virtual district” with “virtual classrooms”, “virtual meeting halls”, “virtual teacher conferences” and multiple accounts to permit a hierarchical infrastructure with varying privileges associated with
- 10 each user name or category. The system provides a universal solution to allowing information flow to both students and educators, while maintaining control of the type and character of material received by students. It also permits internal community or group generation to permit dissemination of information to different levels of educators or administrators on a needs basis. The system can employ common server capability to
- 15 permit multiple districts to have their individual SchoolMail, while at the same time providing the capability of interaction and connectivity among the districts, based upon screening and search criteria. It can also control the desktop of the personal computers that are on the SchoolMail system to prevent students from getting off and onto an open and uncontrolled system.
- 20 Although school systems are coming to the realization that they must provide uniform access to all teachers and administrators within a system, and the capability to communicate with other systems, the cost of setting up the necessary servers, personal computers and information infrastructure can be prohibitive. Maintaining the system can

require substantial numbers of dedicated personnel and rapid advances in technology can make a system obsolete before it is even paid for.

Educators are also finding that without the participation of parents in the educational process, teaching is hampered and less effective. Parental involvement is critical on several levels. An involved parent is more likely to push their child to learn and go beyond the minimum requirements of a class session. An involved parent is also more likely to pay for the cost of the added benefit of technological integration into the classroom. However, parental involvement in education can also be seen by administrators and educators as another level of “bureaucracy” to which they have to answer, and which may sometimes become involved in petty matters. There is a need to enhance the educational experience by providing the interactive, connective technological tools for collaborative learning and involving those who ultimately are paying for the tools while, at the same time, preventing the parents from “micro-managing” their child’s education or using the information high-way to inundate teachers and administrators.

DESCRIPTION OF THE METHOD AND SYSTEM

The method and system to permit the creation of “parent” accounts within a school system’s data transmission system, which are associated with the parent’s child or children who are students in the system. These parent accounts will be capable of being accessed by various levels within the hierarchy of the system and will be associated with one or more schools within the community being serviced by the entity providing the servers and community generation implementation engine. By creating parent accounts, a school system can shift the cost of the overall system from a school budget item to a parental expenditure. This will permit the parents to become part of the school

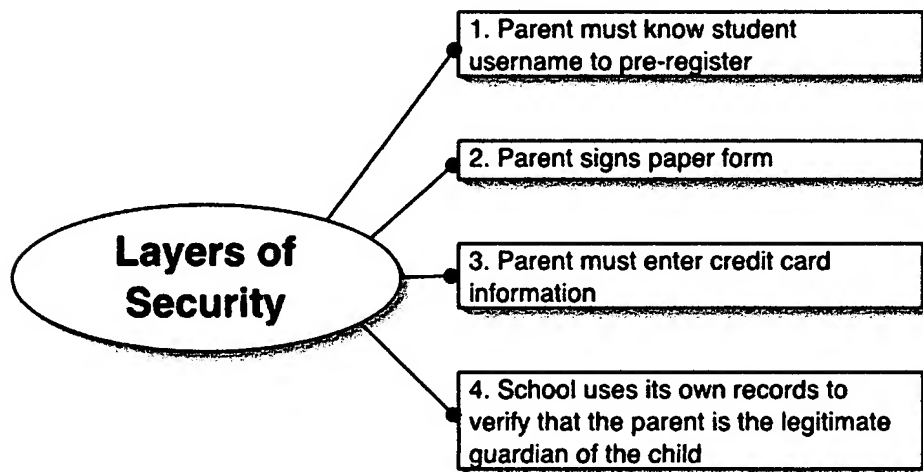
community, but not generally a part of the school or district. The parents can, depending on the level determined by the administrator, have access to certain aspects of the system, but not to everything that the users may have.

Parents can either be seen by the system as a new internal category who are a designated
5 group and can be treated as such by both the system and the administrator who determines access, or the system can have a vertical category coded into the operational software. The former approach permits the addition of parents by the administrator as a defined new group with new accounts as the accounts are needed. This model also permits the administrator, in the hierarchical system, to grant or deny levels of access to
10 parents, in much the same way as the administrator can grant or deny access to teachers and students for monitoring and other purposes. For example, the parents can be given access to grade records and homework assignments, but not the private folders of their children. Those can be accessed by the student and the responsible monitor. The access can also be altered, if the administrator deems it appropriate.

15 An additional benefit is that the schools can work with the service provider and, through economies, can obtain both direct and indirect project funding. The parental accounts can provide sufficient funding to permit the school to finance additional computers and provide accounts to the students. The service provider can also provide parental files and information sharing which can enhance the collaborative learning experience by drawing
20 the parents into the “virtual classroom” as participants, where appropriate. By integrating the parents into the “virtual school”, they become more involved in their child’s education and further enhance the educational process.

The system is also designed to maintain the security of the community. Parents must only have access to their own children's information and there must be security to prevent breaches of privacy. No parent should be allowed to obtain records that would violate a student's right to privacy. The parents cannot be allowed to interfere with teacher or administrator directed activities, nor should they be able to contact or communicate with the teacher unless requested to do so on specific matters. Parents should not be able to generate "education spam" and waste a teacher's valuable time, but should be able to address legitimate concerns in an efficient manner. Having a parental component to a monitored school data transmission system accomplished these objectives and others.

PARENTAL SECURITY OVERVIEW



PARENTAL REGISTRATION

Parent accounts may be created after the student accounts have been created or may be created simultaneously. Because they are linked accounts, the absence of a student account will prevent a parent account from being activated. The onus for the

authentication of parent accounts falls upon the school or district – this enables them to use their own records to verify the legitimacy of any application.

1. Parents are informed of the ability to create parent accounts that are linked to their students. One method for registration is to give the parent the uniform resource
5 locator (“URL”) they should visit to pre-register. The district user name can be made a part of the URL so that the parent will not wander into a registration area for another school by accident or intentionally.
2. Parents visit site to pre-register. They indicate to which students they should be associated (using student's usernames).
- 10 3. Parents enter information for all parent accounts. This would permit a parent to create an account for a grandparent, or separate accounts for a mother and a father. The particulars of the number of accounts vary and are a function of the cost of maintaining the accounts and the people schools permit to be associated with a student.
- 15 4. Parents enter information to pay for account(s). This could be in the form of a credit card, or direct deduction from a checking account, by way of example.
5. Parents receive confirmation code and details in a printable form and are told to print or save it. The parent must get the signed code to the school in a secure way. This can be up to the administrator/school/board, etc. to determine. One method is to have
20 parents physically come in to the school with ID. Alternatively, a parent can mail a signed form in with the code, or bring it in with the student. Exact steps to take for each scenario should be designed to make it as easy as possible for parents to implement them while maintaining the security of the system.

6. Administrator activates parent account(s) using the code or parent name.

Administrators may activate only those accounts that are in their records as being associated with the student, at their discretion. If the parent has entered someone else's name, the account would not be created by the administrator and a security log will be made to show record the attempt. In addition, the administrator must verify that the student accounts the parent has chosen should in fact be associated with them. Thus, for example, a parent that has been barred from seeing their child would not be able to set up an account linked to the child's school account.

7. Parents logging in before the account is activated will receive a status message telling them the account is not yet active. If they are the primary contact (the one who did the initial registration), they will be able to view/edit the account details.

8. If a 'parent' fails to correctly identify the student that should be associated to them more than a certain number of times, their access is blocked so they will not keep guessing and eventually guess correctly. Similarly, parents attempting to associate a student account to them that has already been associated to another parent will trigger an alarm to the administrator informing them of the discrepancy.

ADMINISTRATOR FUNCTIONS

The administrators that activate parent accounts must be designated in the hierarchical system and be associated with the students and the school in which the students are located. The administrators can make changes to the settings for those users.

Another feature of the system requires that parents have a separate authentication and registration process for each school that their children attend (though the process takes

only one step for the parent). Thus, it is possible for parent accounts to be approved for association with a student at one school, but not at another.

Parent accounts are activated the first time an administrator at one school approves them.

Subsequently, an interface is used to set up the association at other schools – but these

5 administrators cannot deactivate a parent account that is active in another school.

Generally, only administrators who have access to all of the schools associated with a parent will be able to completely deactivate parent accounts. Administrators with more restricted access may only be able to remove an association between a student and parent.

Accounts interface

10 The system may employ a new internal categorization similar to how teachers/students are treated, so they can be seen as a group by SchoolMail administrative tools. Thus, each school that decides to have parents as part of the collaborative learning process can have a category established without changes in the code or additional software or hardware. It requires only that the group be recognized within the hierarchy as a new
15 entity with access determined by the administrator having control over that level of the hierarchy.

The parent accounts may be treated differently from other accounts. For example, it may be desirable to be able to store the additional information requested, such as the address and phone number, instead of using the contact information associated to the school or
20 license to which the accounts are assigned (as it is with the other account types). Parents logging in before their account have been activated can see the status of their application – their account is not active, but login is still permitted to provide this access.

As yet a further part of the system, administrators with access will be able to see and manipulate the relationship between students and their parents. The parent interface will show a “children” or similarly designated column (in the same way that students are linked to their monitors), which can be used to show all of the children associated to that parent.

Because of the overall flexibility of the system, some schools will have parent accounts, and some will not. Yet the system will function on the same network and server set-up in order to permit the economical and rapid transmittal of data, while still maintaining the monitoring and filtering function that is important in a secure school environment.

10 **Changes to Appearance (front page)**

It is a further advantage that administrators will be able to control the look and feel of the parent interface separately from teachers and students. A special school categorization “Parents” can make this possible with minimal difficulty while still maintaining the integrity and security of the system and its hierarchical nature.

15 **Usage Reports**

It is also useful for the school administrators to have information as to how many parent accounts have been pre-registered, activated, and are currently active. This will provide information to the school system as to the parental involvement as well as the actual usage by the parents. Logging functions can be incorporated into the system architecture and can be made accessible to only those administrators with a need for the information.

Parent user interface

The user interface may need to be separate from teacher/student, because it may be used not only for administrators to send a parent-only message, but may eventually also contain ad banners and possibly an entire private label. Administrators can edit the front
5 page appearance for the “Parent” interface the same way they edit different schools.

Logs

As a further part of the internal security established within the system, there is an automatic logging function that can inform the administrators about anything unusual that happens. For example, if a parent tries to associate a student to them that someone else
10 has already identified as their child, an alert will be sent to the administrator to inform them of the situation.

Linking students/teachers/parents

The system also permits the linking of students, teachers and parents where the administrator has determined that the linkage would be beneficial. In order to permit this
15 linkage, the current relationship between parents and teachers should necessarily reflect actual teacher/student relationships in the school. The system will allow teachers access to the parents of their students if the system contains relationships for which teachers teach which students. This aspect requires the administrator or their designee to either input teacher/student relationships at the time that a group or class is registered or
20 created, or with a group manager type application where the teachers find their students and select them. This would allow special access by teachers to parents and would allow a teacher to broadcast to a parent, or send files to a parent’s file sharing folder.

Group manager

A group manager is useful throughout the system, but most specifically for the parent
5 component. It is used to allow teachers to associate themselves with all of their students,
which in turn would associate them with their students' parents. By making this
association, it will be easy for teachers to contact all of the parents of their students.

File storage and sharing

File sharing allows all users associated with a community access to teacher/administrator
10 shared folders. It is possible to modify file sharing to allow sharing information with
parents yet restrict access to folders that are intended for school use.

Parent private folder

Like all users, parents have their own private folder. The system will easily allow
teachers/administrators to push files to groups. At the same time, they could send
15 information to the private folders of parents associated with their students.

E-mail broadcast

Email Broadcast enables users with sufficient privilege to send a single email message to
a number of users within their community matching certain search criteria.

Although the system's interface can be limited to contacting teachers and students, the
20 system can be adapted to make the account type definition dynamic depending on those
available.

The system is capable of permitting teachers with administrative clearance to send an email to a group of recipients, and so allow contact to their students' parents only (see above) or all parents, or to anyone in the license. (This is contingent on the licensee having established the relationship between teachers and students.) This option can
5 permit the administrator to designate certain teachers to undertake broadcast responsibilities along with their individual student contacts.

The system is also able to make it possible for E-mail Broadcast to be used by other account types as well. Each account type could have a list of other accounts they can reach, and a setting to say whether or not they can broadcast. If they cannot broadcast, the
10 tool may be employed as a directory search. These settings can be configurable by administrators. Examples of such broadcasts are:

Administrators

Find anyone in schools to which they are assigned.

Teachers

15 Find anyone in schools to which they are assigned.

Parents

Find teachers of their children.

Students

Find teachers, students, administrators in their school, but not permit a general broadcast.

20 This would be an example of the search function rather than the broadcast function.

The “reply-to” address used for the broadcast can be customized, preventing a straight reply to a message from going to the originator. This is most useful in the case of announcements sent by the school, when an email address for further information would be more appropriate than the address of the teacher or administrator who sent the notice.

5 **Banner server**

The appeal of parent accounts with their own interface is that they can be used to push sponsorship that will not reach teachers or students and thus not pollute the “virtual schoolroom”. A flexible, easily managed banner server which may be managed by the entity hosting the system is one alternative. The administrators can also be given this responsibility. The degree of flexibility available permits various people, both within and associated with the system hierarchy to assume the role.

Parental Monitoring of children

It is also possible for the system to be configured to make parents responsible for their children. The system may be configured to allow parents to become the monitors for their children at the time of registration, at the discretion of the administrators.

Option for parental/shared monitoring

Another feature permits the use of multiple monitors or to send copies of relevant messages to the parents at the administrators’ discretion

Calendaring

The system’s broadcast capabilities also permit the showing of schedules to parents, inform them of homework assignments, etc.

Quick polls

Because the community is controlled by the administrator and has a commonality, it is possible to assess community interest in topics of administrators' choosing by conducting polls to all subscribing parents.

5 Parent Generated Profiles

Because the collaborative process of shared learning is not confined to the classroom and the teachers, the system permits parents to be able to create profiles. The administrator can determine the level at which the parent profile will be available, and with community moderation, parental profiles could be written in a manner appropriate to the closed
10 community that would have access to them.

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